

Reciprocal

by generalzoi

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Summary: "Reciprocating motion is a repetitive up and down or back and forth-Astrid, are you listening?" "Huh? Oh, yeah, sure." A series of back and forth moments between Astrid and Hiccup. Contains major spoilers for HTTYD2.

Reciprocal

Astrid liked braiding Hiccup's hair. She liked messing with him generally, and had started out with pinching and prodding, so by that measure the braiding was an improvement, though not one Hiccup was wild about. Braid snagged more easily in his helmet than loose hair. Once he complained about that Astrid mostly confined them to the area near his neck where the helmet didn't quite reach. But still. He ended most every day covered in burrs and leaves and twigs, clumps of mud and dirt, and sometimes he couldn't tell what bits were the braids and which were errant pieces of plant life at first touch. It was somehow uniquely humbling to be talking with someone, idly run his hands through his hair, feel what he thought was a twig, and then yank hard enough to make himself cry out.

But Astrid liked braiding—the act of it more than the braids themselves, he thought—and showed no signs of stopping, no matter how he sometimes glared at her. Not that he glared much because, well, who was he to keep her from her fun?

She sat, pressed against his side. When Hiccup thought of the last five years, he thought of melting. Of water seeping through cracks to fill the spaces completely, or of molten metals poured into casts. That's how things with Astrid felt. That they had been two separate pieces, solid and unyielding. Time had softened them. Warmth had melted them. And now they flowed together, perfectly fitted. It wasn't a perfect analogy; water froze again, and shattered the cracks when it did. The metal would be cast and cooled and rendered unchanging. People were more like the ocean, maybe. Always shifting, incapable of standing still.

He wondered if she'd think that was poetic or sappy. It was hard to tell sometimes.

Apparently her stylist's fingers were sated, because she wrapped them around the back of his neck, scratching at the fine scruff at the base of his neck. "Am I ready for the gala?" he asked.

"What?" The look she gave him was honestly baffled, and half amused. It wasn't an aesthetic thing for her, after all. "Do you have somewhere to go tonight? Some hot date lined up?"

"Oh yeah," he drawled. His legs were crossed under him, and, he realized belatedly, half-asleep, but he stretched them out so that he could strike a sensuous pose. "You might say it'sâ€"

"No," she said immediately. "Nope, mh-mmâ€"

"â€"as hot asâ€"

"Don't you do it."

"â€"dragon's fire_."

"_Ow_." She shoved him on his back, straddled his hips. "_Ow_. I pity the girl you're going to use that line on."

"You shouldn't. She'sâ€" Astrid's lips were on his, and he let himself be distracted. "She's..." Another kiss. Her hands were on his chest, and he raised his to her waist.

"Stop talking," Astrid whispered.

Yes ma'am, he thought, but luckily didn't say.

â€"

"I just expected the spring to be able to absorb more force than that."

"Mm-hm," Astrid hummed distractedly. Hiccup's head was cushioned on her stomach, his arms flailing in the air above them as he tried to talk out the most recent problem with his...something or other. New invention. Astrid had lost track.

He stared up at the ceiling. She stared at him; her whole body was curled slightly towards his because they had started the evening talking about Stormfly's hurt claw and Toothless's recent penchant for nighttime screeching and the twins' latest misadventuresâ€"topics where she could actually hold her own. Now Hiccup was off on his own world, using terms no one except maybe Gobber understood, and Astrid's main job was to be a sounding board and a pillow. If she wasn't around, he used Toothless the exact same way, and if neither of them were there he'd just talk to his workbench. (She knew he was talking to the bench, and not just to the air, because she had actually caught him _arguing_ with it one day.)

It was alright. It helped him to talk things out, and she hoped she was at least better company than the bench. Astrid cared about Hiccup's inventions in abstract ways: because they made him happy, because they helped the people of Berk, because they helped _her_

specifically. Listening to the details, however, was about as stimulating as spending an afternoon lugging haybales from one end of the field to the other. Maybe less, because there was always the possibility she'd find a nest of Terrors in the hay to provide a jolt of excitement.

Now she nodded and made agreeable noises at the appropriate moments, combing her fingers through her hair and trying to figure out whether the ground might be too marshy after the recent rain for combat practice the next day. Maybe she should focus on flying instead.

"Astrid, are you listening?" His attention was on her for the first time in an hour or so, and the way he smiled said he already knew the answer.

"Of course," she answered lightly.

"Then what did I just say?"

"The silk is really working out better though. You wouldn't think so but flexibility is key, and the cord frays a lot faster, although I really want to see how that new copper alloy works."

"Do you know what that means?"

"That you're, I don't know, making a silky saddle or something."

He actually laughed. "Or something. Ah, I'm sorry, I'll stop rambling."

Yes yes yes, the impatient, fidgety side of her cried out. But she knew well enough by now to know when he was close to something. "No, explain it to me. You're not replacing the silk with the copper, right? It's got to be much more rigid."

"No," he said excitedly, "it's actually two completely different things. See—" She nodded and tuned him out completely. Her hip was beginning to ache where it was pressed against the hard ground, and her stomach sweaty and sticky where he laid against her, but his mind and his mouth were both off and running, and she wasn't about to stop them. Not when they were the most brilliant parts of him.

She had to be a better partner than the bench, at least.

* * *

><p>"Hold still," Astrid said.<p>

"I think I kind of have to." He hissed and winced as she gently touched the wet rag to his bloodied forehead. She had his chin firmly in hand, true, but every touch caused a whole body flinch, and this would go so much faster if he'd just suck it up.

"This is your own fault," she said. She released his chin to brush his bangs back, which meant she had no way to hold him still when he twitched again. "You ran into that tree. You deserve this."

"Please, Astrid, be a little more creepy while I spill my blood near you."

She laughed, and blew gently on the scrape to clear out a few stray hairs she had missed. "Aw, does it hurt?" She poutedâ€"as well as she could around a grin, anywayâ€"and he rolled his eyes and crossed his arms in a huff. "Does it hurt, widdle baby?"

"You really need to work on your bedside manner." The wound was finally clean, though blood still trickled out, so she pressed a dry cloth firmly against his brow and instructed him to hold it in place while she got the gauze.

Usually when Hiccup hurt himself, he treated himself too, probably because Astrid always liked this. It wasn't her fault; he took some spectacularly _stupid_ risks. His stories were always either mouth-gapingly stupid (like how he totally thought that cord was tethered before he jumped off the cliff, and also that it could actually hold his weight) or eye-rollingly stupid (like how he broke his toe tripping over a bucket because he was trying to write and walk at the same time). Astrid treated them with the gravitas they deserved, which was to say none at all.

This time, though, she'd caught him before he could limp off to lick his wounds, and even though there was still half a laugh waiting to bubble up, her hands were gentle as she tied the gauze in place. "Now," she said, leaning back to inspect her handiwork. His hair bunched around the bandages, looking even messier than usual. "What are you going to say when people ask what happened?"

"It was a rouge Rumblehorn!" He thrust his arms into the air, waving them to indicate the scale of the imaginary beast. "She came after us when we accidentally found her nest. I'm lucky she didn't bite off my ear."

"Or your throat," Astrid said.

"Exactly. It was pure skill and very quick reflexes that let me escape with only a scrape." The gauze pressed heavily over one eye, giving him a slight squint which somehow made his mischievous grin that much more charming.

"Mm." She gently tugged some of his more unruly locks from beneath the bandages and smoothed them. "Very good. If you happen to tell it to someone who doesn't know you, they might even believe it."

"We can dream," he said, and she laughed.

â€"

Astrid had become Berk's leading expert on Sharp Class dragons. This meant that she was the go-to person for problems involving Nadders or Timberjacks or any others, and that she had developed a particular style of aerial combat that emphasized her dragons' spikes and claws more than most. She was also hard-headed, extremely confident, and employed a warrior's conditioning in dangerous situations. All of _that_ meant that Hiccup had become very adept at treating lacerations. It's not that the village healers weren't capable, or that she didn't like them. It's just that most of the time she'd get so pumped up on adrenaline that she'd want to rush straight to him and tell him what happened, and no matter how she insisted that she was fine and it didn't hurt and he was being a baby, honestly, it

freaked him out to watch her walk off deep red blooming through the rips in her clothes.

So, she talked, and he tended. Today the cut was on her calf; it was longer than a handlength and deep enough that he felt faint when he first saw it. Not that either the cut or the pricking stitches as he sewed her up seemed to bother her.

Her trousers, boots, and socks sat in a bundle near the fireplace. He'd had to kick them there halfway through to make room for his own feet, and they'd landed not with a soft pouft, but a wet plop. He was going to insist she throw away the lot, even the boots. She had more than enough seamstresses in her family anyway, and the extra wardrobe to show for it.

As absorbed as he was in making sure the bleeding had stopped and his stitches were secure, he didn't notice immediately when she fell silent. When he did, and looked up, she was giving him a look that meant 'I'm glad I have you.' He knew it well, considering that she had picked it up from him.

"It's probably going to scar," he said. She preened. Of course she did. "Keep off of that for a few days. Use Stormfly if you need a hand, or Toothless. He's got a lower profile."

"On no," she said dryly, "I'll have to ride my dragon everywhere for days. Whatever shall I do?"

"I can't wait to see you try to navigate the market from way up there." He sat back, thumbing the arch of her foot as his hand fell. Her toes curled.

"Don't be silly. They have that fly-up counter now."

He carefully stretched out her leg and dug his thumbs into the ball of her foot. She hummed happily and leaned back along the bench. No more than a minute into the massage though her foot twitched, and she shifted to drop her good leg into his lap. "Just do the left one tonight." It was the only concession she would make towards her wound.

"You're not keeping those bloody boots, are you?" he asked as he set to work again.

"Why wouldn't I?"

He sighed.

* * *

><p>There were some tricky things about his relationship with Astrid. One was that five years in they knew each other extremely well. Most of the time it just made them an especially effective team. But the problem with knowing so much is that they knew the bad stuff too. Exactly what buttons to hit to hurt, exactly how to throw each other off and kick them while they were down. They didn't fight much anymore, but when they did it was brutal and nasty, because Astrid just wanted to win, and he had a vicious tongue and a lifetime's experience using it defensively.<p>

On the plus side, they also knew the quickest ways to calm each other down, how to tell when one wasn't being honest and what they really meant instead. But the second tricky thing was that being fifteen was vastly different from being twenty. They had changed so much that sometimes he'd think he understood Astrid perfectly, only to realize he was thinking of 15-year-old Astrid, not 20-year-old Astrid.

That may have been the problem tonight. They weren't fighting, exactly, so much as she was just stalking back and forth across the shop and screaming at him. He'd seen the fire simmering as soon as she stalked into his workshop, but his best efforts to diffuse it had only wound her up more and more, until a light-hearted joke about his victory in the last dragon race had caused her to explode.

Okay. He got it now. She's messed some task up, or more likely failed some arbitrary, near-impossible standard she'd randomly decided she should meet, and poking fun at her loss made her feel inadequate and made him a target. Awesome. Great. He had figured it out. Now he just had to keep her from killing him.

His hands were raised in a gesture that was half consolatory, and half surrender. It didn't do a thing to stem the flood of curses raining down upon him. He decided not to take it personally, since it really wasn't, and also because he couldn't actually understand most of the things she was saying. She got kind of hiss-y when she was upset sometimes.

"Yes!" he finally cried. "Yes, you're right, I am the son of a scum-sucking troll!"

Her look very clearly indicated she did not appreciate him barging into her rant. "Half-eaten Gronkle turd."

"I am the slime between Tuffnut's toes!"

She snarled. "Smarmy little _worm riddled_â€"

"Swine?" he offered. "Eel? Diseased Snafflefang?" She had at least stopped pacing and yelling, although she looked slightly _more_ likely to hit him now. Still, he pressed on. "I am an odious Hotburple fart, a scrawny, cowardly, dim-wittedâ€"

"You are not," she snapped. "Except scrawny. Don't even try if you're not going to do it right."

"I'm sorry," he said, throwing his hands out. "I guess I don't know the right way to insult myself."

"If you're upset, then tell me to stop. Don't do this passive-aggressive bullshit. Don't _patronize_ me."

"I'm not upset," he said, which was mostly true. "I just want you to calm down. If yelling at me will calm you down, that's fine. I just want to join in too. It can be a bonding activity!"

She stared at him for a minute solid, then kicked his stool hard enough to shatter it and stalked out of the workshop. "I don't want to calm down yet!" she called over her shoulder.

He trotted after her. "Where are you going?"

"To destroy something, so that when I do calm down, I don't feel like a total ass for taking it out on you." She looked back one more time, and her glare stopped him cold. "You BUTT!"

"Okay. Have fun! I love you!" he called after her. Her resulting curse very nearly made his ears blister.

â€

Hiccup never seemed to have ideas any smaller than "grand." Most of the time this was great. The quality of life had improved in Berk dramatically thanks to the dragons and Hiccup's various inventions. Sometimes, though, "grand" mostly meant "costly and time consuming" and also meant that he needed more resources and hands than just him in his workshop. Astrid tried to be understanding of his work, honestly, but sometimes he'd just get an idea so far removed from reality that she wouldn't know what to say. If he wanted to waste his own time on it, that was fine, probably, but he couldn't reasonably expect the whole village to cater to his every harebrained scheme. _Reasonably_.

Hiccup was not always reasonable.

That was how, "I really want to see how this works out!" and "We don't have the resources for that, Hiccup," turned into, "You're being _selfish_!" and "Excuse me, who's the dragon master here, Astrid?"

"Look," Hiccup said, "I'll talk to Gobber and Olov, and we'll get the materialsâ€

"They'll do it because they trust you to help Berk," Astrid snapped. "But winter is coming and we need to be conserving right now."

"Why wouldn't they trust me?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because you want people to waste time and materials to pursue one of your pet projects when we should be preparing for the cold season."

He looked a little like a dragon when he was angry, all narrowed eyes and flared nostrils. She wondered if he had always been that way, or if he'd picked it up from Toothless. "This _is_ importantâ€

"It's not!" She lowered her voice and took a deep breath to try and calm down. "Look, I get it. You want to help the dragons. But the dragons have been surviving winter with us just fine for years, and on their own since the beginning of time before that. They don't need this...playhouse, or whatever."

"It's a nesting station." He yanked the plans across the table closer to himself. "When it's done it'll be a more efficient use of spaceâ€

"For the overcrowding problem we don't have?" He was glaring obstinately at a point on the wall just past her now, and averted his eyes when she tried to meet them. "Hiccup, we can look at it again when spring comes. I will _help_ you. Just give me a hammer and tell me where to point it. But we can't do this now." There was really no

reason to do it in spring either, but maybe she could convince him of that later. Sometimes she thought he intended to treat the dragons of Berk better than its people, but he had a responsibility to both. And if she had to beat that into his head, so be it.

She was right. She knew she was. Obviously she was willing to fight for it. And she thought Hiccup knew she was right too. But he was still so touchy about his ideas. It had to have come from a lifetime of watching them be mocked and fail, over and over. That was fine. She got it. But as much as she felt for all his rough years, it would be irresponsible to let his pride hurt the people of Berk. He knew that.

She knew he knew when instead of arguing further, he snatched his harness from its hook in the corner and made a beeline for the door. "Come on, Toothless," he called. The dragon, who had wisely decided to ignore their argument, popped up and trotted after him.

"Where are you going?" Astrid asked, following close behind.

"I'm going for a flight."

"We haven't resolved anything!" She reached for him, but he shoved her hands away. "Stop acting like a child! There's things you need to take care of here."

"What, like you?" he snapped.

"Like your responsibilities."

"I'll take care of my responsibilities!" He threw his arms open wide. "I'll take such good care of them that Toothless will get jealous, like, 'Hey there, Hiccup, I wished you took good care of me like that!' But right now I'm going for a flight."

She tilted her chin at him, all fire and challenge. "You know you only run away when you're wrong."

She didn't see him until midafternoon the next day. When he finally returned, the first thing he did was gather his plans for the nesting station and lock them far, far away.

"So," he said, "winter. What do we need to do?"

"Go talk to Gobber," she said. "I think he needs some help."

"Right, right." He was fidgety, restless. He didn't head for the door, but he did shift on his feet, rapping his knuckles against the counter and biting his lip. He opened his mouth, closed it, clacked his teeth together, and sighed.

Astrid reached out to tip his chin up. To force him to meet her eyes. Her smile said she didn't need an apology. His said he was sorry anyway.

* * *

><p>Hiccup didn't spend much time in the forests of Berk anymore. He had a whole childhood's worth of exploring them, and these days he much preferred the view from the air. Why trudge through tangled

underbrush when you could fly?<p>

Today, he walked. Toothless followed alongside, sniffing and scaling jagged rocks, slithering under half fallen trees, occasionally bounding out of sight to come bursting out of the bushes. Hiccup let him play, and kept his attention on the forest around them.

When he was upset, he flew. When Astrid was upset, she walked.

He didn't know much except that Ruffnut had wandered out of the forest earlier, looking annoyed, and told him, "I don't know, she had a fight with her mom or something, it's stupid." Hiccup knew the Hoffersons well enough to know they were good people, if moderately intimidating. But they weren't people to Astrid, they were parents, and sometimes that got complicated. He knew that better than anyone.

As wonderful as Astrid was at talking about his problems and saying all the right things, she often didn't give him the opportunity to do the same. She was quiet about the things that troubled her. She liked to pretend she didn't hurt. She didn't talk about the uncles and aunts and cousins who hadn't come back from war. About the older brother she barely remembered. About why she pushed herself so hard, and why some failures sent her into a screaming rage and others just seemed to break her heart. He hoped it really was just a fight with her mother, but there was a chance she wouldn't tell him either way.

He found her whittling a stick to a point, with Stormfly sitting at her back. The stick was too curved and oddly weighted for a spear, but she focused on her self-appointed task with grim determination. Her lips were pressed so tightly together that they were nearly white, so he put aside any thoughts of questions and went and found her a new stick.

She jabbed the sharpened end of the first one into the ground in front of her, and took the second without a word. Half an hour later she had half a dozen spikes arranged in a semicircle in front of her, and she plunged her knife into the ground and sighed.

"Subtle," Hiccup said, gesturing at the barrier.

She glanced up at him from beneath her bangs. "What are you talking about?" Stormfly, who had up until now been napping peacefully, suddenly jerked, climbed to her feet, and went chasing after Toothless with a squawk. Astrid looked annoyed at her back being left open. Hiccup wondered if she'd start carving sticks again, but all she did again was grunt and drop her head into her hands.

He sat cross legged on the other side of her barrier. There was a springy twig near his feet that forked near one end. He picked it up, stuck a pebble in the crook, and pulled it back like a catapult to fling the pebble at Astrid. It hit her knee and tumbled into her lap.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Come on, people, this is our chance!" he called to an imaginary army. "Their defenses have holes a mile wide! We can take it."

"It's not a mile," Astrid said.

"A scale mile. Look out below!" His next pebble sailed directly into one of the sticks as if it had been drawn by a magnet, and bounced back towards him.

Astrid snorted. "My defenses are better than your attacks."

"Yeah, well, we already knew that." She was distracted for a moment by the dragons trampling the underbrush, and he took the moment to carefully step around the spikes and drop back down in front of her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

Something that almost wanted to be a smile flickered across her lips before her face fell completely. "I just...no. Not really."

"Because you could. I'm right here." He leaned forward, pressing his forehead against her and gently nuzzling. "_Right_ here."

"I know." Her body, which had been huddled tight and small, unwound. She crawled into his lap, face buried in his neck and legs locked loosely around his waist. That seemed to be all she needed. His hands traced her back, her waist, stroked her hair and arms. He planted kiss after kiss on her crown, cheek, shoulder, whatever bit of her he could reach. Slowly, slowly, her tense body loosened and her breath evened.

They stayed like that until the sky was orange with dusk and she could smile again.

â€"

Sometimes it was like a chain. Somewhere too far away for her ears Toothless would trill mournfully, and Stormfly would hear and come croon in Astrid's ear, and she would go find Hiccup.

It was an occasionally difficult task that they'd gotten pretty good at over the years. Today Stormfly didn't seem agitated or nudge her incessantly, so instead of climbing on her back Astrid started searching around the village. Outside of Berk Hiccup considered the whole world his for the exploring, but inside of it there was still a limited number of places he favored.

She found him at Stoick's monument, seated between the statue's feet and facing the village, so that his father was at his back. He waited until she was close, then waved the pencil he had been playing with vaguely upwards.

"This is the only place in the village I can't see him," he said, and went back to toying with his pencil.

She curled against his side, putting one arm on his shoulder and the other around his waist. Making sure she was as close as she could be. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head methodically, an overlong motion that seemed more about the repetition than any real dissent. "There's nothing left to talk about. It's just a mess." Whatever he was going to say next was

cut off by a small, choked noise; he locked his lips and slapped the pencil against his knuckles like it was a punishment.

She didn't try to stop him. Just slotted her legs over his and pressed a hand to his chest.

He stared with glossy eyes through the ground and deep, deep below. "Stoick the Vast. How does a man even get that big? I don't know. I don't get it. I'm justâ€" He held his hands in front of his chest, barely a thumb's length part.

"You can touch the sky," she said, running her thumb across his chest, feeling his heartbeat.

His arms, shoulders, whole body slumped as if someone had cut the only strings holding him up. "Anyone can do that these days, Astrid."

"I know." She let every ounce of her pride seep into her voice. Finally he met her eyes, and rested his hand over her own.

She kissed his temple. Nuzzled his throat and felt his pulse. Pulled their joined hands close so he could feel her heartbeat in turn. "I'm right here," she murmured over and over. "I'm right here."

"Don't leave." He sagged against her like a tree falling. Like a dragon without flight. "Don't go."

"I won't. I won't ever." On either side of their clasped hands, their hearts beat in time. "I promise."

End
file.